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DEPARTMENT FOR DAS BRYZA AND EUR/CARC

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIAN ELECTIONS: COMPETITION FOR THE FIRST TIME

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: As the Georgian Presidential election campaign gears up for its final two weeks, a number of themes have emerged on the campaign trail. The most glaring is the brutal blood sport aspect of the Georgian campaign, with each political party battling to the death for dominance. The ruling United National Movement (UNM) and the opposition's United National Opposition (UNC) are both guilty of turning every issue into a gruesome winner-take-all contest. As a result, the campaign has at times become over the fairness of the election itself instead of over the issue of the day, with every party vying for the approval of Western Embassies and international observers. That said, local experts agree that this is the most competitive election in Georgian history, with the opposition mounting the most credible campaign ever against a strong, ruling party candidate in former President Saakashvili. It is also the first election in almost a decade where the voters list (as a result in part of U.S. assistance) has not been the number one problem. Experts also agree that more than ever, candidates are traveling to the regions to actually attempt to garner votes. Our message to all is to focus on the issues and to respect the results, provided that international observers consider them representative of the will of the people. End summary.

CAMPAIGNING AS BLOOD SPORT

¶2. (C) Politics in Georgia is not for the faint of heart and the current campaign for the Presidential election on January 5, 2008 shows that neither is campaigning. The most glaring theme of the campaign is the brutal blood sport aspect of the race, with each political party battling to the death for dominance. Nowhere is this more evident than in the struggle with oligarch Badri Patarkatsisvili who Saakashvili and his team believe will do anything to bring them down. But this attitude seems all-pervasive. When Republican Party leader Dato Usupashvili failed to receive the nomination to be the candidate for the United Opposition Council (UOC), many asked him what he was going to do now that he was "washed up" in politics. He replied that he would soldier on as Chair of the Republican Party. This vignette demonstrates how people think of politicians in Georgia - one is either dominant or out of the race. There is simply no in-between. As a result, when we speak to both opposition and ruling party officials, they play up their chances and offer wildly optimistic assessments of how their candidates will fare in the elections. There is no polling or private assessment that we think is reliable. The reality is that it is hard to tell how much support former President Saakashvili lost as a result of the November crack-down on demonstrators. He has clearly lost some support in Tbilisi, but we believe that his support in the regions remains substantial.

13. (C) Perhaps acknowledging its almost certain defeat in the Presidential elections, the opposition's tactic has been to focus largely on the conduct of the campaign rather than on issues themselves. As a result, most of the debate has been over opposition allegations that the ruling party has abused administrative resources, pressured individuals to vote for Saakashvili, and intimidated the media to report in an unbalanced way. Although some of these arguments appear to have merit and the ruling party is using every political technique in the book to win over voters, the facts about many of these issues are not clear cut. This has led to endless arguments over, for example, the definition of the use of administrative resources -- with both the ruling party and the opposition claiming to be in the right. The presence of the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights as well as of Western Embassies has helped to keep blatant violations of the law in check but the parties have been campaigning Western Embassies and institutions almost as much as the Georgian electorate. At times, it has seemed that the opposition is preparing more for a loss and subsequent demonstrations on January 6, than for a win on January 5.

WHAT GETS LOST? OFTEN THE ISSUES

14. (C) There are real issues of concern for the average Georgian, most notably the failure of the Saakashvili Government's reforms to have much of an impact on the standard of living of most Georgians. If anything, life for

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the average Georgian has become harder under Saakashvili as a result of continuing Russian bans on Georgian agriculture, wine and water as well as other structural reforms that resulted in layoffs, especially of government employees. This has put a damper on the overwhelmingly strong public support for Saakashvili in the heady days after the Rose Revolution in 2003. Many of his detractors are among the Tbilisi intelligentsia, who saw their privileged positions and guaranteed salaries and support systems disappear as Georgia enacted reforms to the Georgian education, health and other sectors. Interestingly, it is the areas of Tbilisi where these residents live - the fashionable Vake district - where Saakashvili's support is its lowest. The same is true in Adjara. Many of Aslan Abashidze's cronies, who once benefited from his corrupt rule, have lost their livelihoods.

The result has been a low amount of support for the UNM in this region. On the other hand, in regions such as Samegrelo and Kakheti, support for Saakashvili remains strong, based on improvements in electricity supply, road infrastructure and the like. Job losses have not been as marked in such regions, where the economy is largely agricultural. The National Movement's only worry in Zugdidi, for example, where it has clearly out-organized and out-campaigned the opposition, is that Saakashvili's victory will be so crushing that it raises instant complaints of fraud.

15. (C) The Government under Saakashvili undertook its painful but critical reforms without perhaps enough emphasis on the social impact of those reforms on the average Georgian. This is what the focus of the opposition, and the election debate, should rightly be. For example, it is widely believed that the confidence (some would say arrogance) of the young and talented professionals around Saakashvili contributed to a lack of transparency and dialogue with the public over the pace and content of reforms that have impacted so many. It is this blind spot that contributed to the larger than expected crowds that turned out on the street on November 7. Rather than listening and altering course earlier, the Government was forced to concede on every demand, but too

late to avoid the massive protest and subsequent crackdown. The opposition, although now at least nominally united, has still not found its feet in terms of articulating and emphasizing those issues which matter most to the public. It is no secret that the UNM campaign is better financed and better organized than any of its competitors.

SOME UP SIDES: MOST COMPETITIVE RACE EVER

¶16. (C) Despite these down sides, experts see this election as the most competitive in Georgian history. With most of the opposition parties united behind a single (if uninspiring) candidate, the ruling party - and Saakashvili - for the first time will get a run for their money. Despite a lot of focus on the modalities of the campaign, the candidates have been campaigning Western-style, with rallies throughout Georgia. In addition, for the first time since 1999, the inaccuracy of the voters' list is not the number one problem going into the elections. As a result of improvements made by the Government and funded by USAID, there is more confidence in the list. Also positively, experts believe that this campaign more than any other looks like a real competition with a stress on programs rather than personalities and that more promises are being made, even if many of them may be unrealistic. Finally, as a result of this move toward more populist, Western style campaigning, experts believe that citizens are more likely to go to the polling station and participate in politics, with a belief that their vote really does matter in today's Georgia.

ON BALANCE, ENVIRONMENT IMPROVED

¶17. (C) On balance, we view the election environment as improved as a result of Georgia's commitment to achieving Euro-Atlantic standards of democracy required by NATO and the EU, as well as our work on the diplomatic and assistance sides. The days of massive ballot stuffing - which was the spark that lead to the Rose Revolution - appear to be behind Georgia. Candidates now feel the need to travel the country to lay out platforms and to solicit votes. They are making Western style promises (albeit sometimes exaggerated) and starting to focus on social programs. There is a real, if unresolved, debate on what is fair in terms of using an incumbent's natural advantage in the electoral campaign. Although Georgian culture colors the campaign with emotive language and at times sanguine predictions, it is clear that the campaign is moving slowly from a Soviet style one man show to a more populist, issue-centered contest in which the

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voter and his or her concerns come more to the fore.
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